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ABSTRACT

This paper suggests that the current wave of educational reform carries with it a conception of "excellence" derived from concern for the productivity of the nation's human potential. First, differing concepts of excellence are addressed, followed by a discussion of recent educational reforms that are perceived as threats to students who are at risk of dropping out. Finally, policy implications of this discussion are considered. Sixty-nine references are included. Appended is a summary of excellence reforms perceived as threats to at-risk students in member states served by the Appalachia Educational Laboratory and a summary of policy recommendations. (SI)

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POLICY ISSUES

Educational Excellence and Potential Dropouts: Theory, Research, and Policy Implications

by Mark W. Lanier

November 1986

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Educational Excellence and Potential Dropouts: Theory, Research, and Policy Implications

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November 1986

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ABSTRACT

Based on a human capital conception of excellence, recent reports on educational reform and state policy responses have focused on increasing standards for students. Higher standards in forms such as more demanding high school graduation course requirements, more time in school and on homework, and minimum competency requirements have been viewed by many critics as threats to students who are at risk of dropping out. By increasing stratification by ability, by increasing frustration and lowering self-esteem due to academic failures, by forcing some students to choose between school and employment, by setting standards perceived to be unattainable by some students, and in other ways, the reforms have resulted in predictions and reasoned arguments that dropout rates will increase unless these threats are addressed.

Recognizing the potential benefits of higher standards for most students, including those at risk, this paper strongly recommends their continued adoption and implementation. At the same time, the impacts of higher standards must be monitored. A variety of current policies and policy directions in education and social policy should in the long run lessen the dropout problem, if they receive widespread and sustained commitments. For the immediate problem, alternative educational programs should be available for likely dropouts. Experimental programs that both provide treatments based on past research and practice and increase our knowledge of program effectiveness should be the focus of development and evaluation efforts. These and other recommendations reflect the need to continue the push for excellence while addressing the needs of all students.

Introduction

This paper suggests that the current wave of educational reform carries with it a conception of "excellence" derived from concern for the productivity of the nation's human capital. As a result, numerous states have raised their educational standards, often through requiring more academic content in the high school curriculum, mandating minimum achievement levels, and demanding more time for learning. Although positive effects can be expected for many students and probably for education as a whole, these higher standards may have negative consequences for some students, particularly those at-risk of dropping out of school. Policies to minimize the negative impacts, based on concern for equity and a more inclusive conception of excellence, are often missing from the educational reform agenda. The following section addresses, in turn, differing concepts of excellence, recent educational reforms perceived as threats to dropout rates, and the policy implications of this discussion.

Concepts of Excellence

In response to the fact that "there has been surprisingly little critical public discussion about the meaning of excellence as an educational goal," Prakash and Waks (1985) identify and describe four conceptions of educational excellence: "the technical, the rational, the personal, and the social" (p. 79). Of these, the personal, or self-actualization, conception of excellence places the most emphasis on the need "to develop alternatives for young people, especially those who are

unwilling or unable to adjust to standard school routines" (p. 96)--that is, for our purposes, on dropout prevention. However, it is the technical conception of excellence, based on "the efficient adjustment of productive means to determinate, measurable ends" (p. 81), that "runs throughout The Nation at Risk and the many state and local reports and reforms shaped by it" (p. 82).

Kenneth Strike (1985) contrasts the conceptions of excellence that emerge from the "Jeffersonian ideal" and from human capital theory. Borrowing terminology from the field of testing, Strike describes Jefferson's educational philosophy as partly "criterion-referenced"--to the fullest extent possible, all Americans should possess the skills necessary for meaningful political participation. This conception of excellence differs markedly from the "norm-referenced" conception of excellence generated by human capital theory. The former "is, in principle, achievable by everyone," while under the latter "not everyone can be excellent" (p. 410). Although the Jeffersonian ideal is mentioned in A Nation at Risk, National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), and other reform reports, the human capital conception of excellence, in which "education is seen as an investment in the productive capacity of individuals" (Strike, 1985, p. 411), receives much greater emphasis. Moreover, recent reform reports at least implicitly adopt conceptions of equity based on human capital theory, in which opportunity and efficiency determine justness, rather than conceptions of equity that stress equality of results. If Jeffersonian concepts of excellence and equity were employed, then increased dropout rates resulting from greater academic demands on students could not be justified.

The technical, human capital conceptions of excellence in education prevalent today reflect "a national concern that the nation's long-run economic future hinges on building a more effective system of education" (Guthrie, 1985, p. 331). In some ways, the current emphasis on these limited conceptions of excellence may represent "a triumph of our nation's economic goals over its political goals, of economic efficiency over democratic participation" (Strike, 1985, p. 416). However, reviewing the evidence for and against such a sweeping conclusion is a task well beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, we now focus on one specific predicted implication of the current conception of excellence--the possibility of increased dropout rates.

Excellence Reforms As Threats To Dropout Rates

Excellence and equity, sometimes expressed as quality and equality, "have alternated in dominating the attention of policymakers and educators" at least since the 1950s (Alexander and Pallas, 1983, p. 1; McDill, Natriello, and Pallas, 1985, p. 416). Critics of the recent push for excellence have expressed their dissatisfaction over "the lack of attention to dropping out as an equity issue" and the possibility that "the very recommendations made by the various commissions may exacerbate the unnoted dropout problem" (McDill et al., 1985, p. 416; see also Howe, 1984; Edson, 1983). In order to better understand these criticisms, this section reviews the literature on the predictors, causes, and consequences of dropping out; describes which reforms are perceived as most problemmatic and how; and investigates where these reforms have been implemented.

The Population At Risk

Statistics on school attendance and dropout rates are notoriously subject to definitional, procedural, and methodological problems (Cooke, Ginsburg, and Smith, 1985; Hammack, 1986; Morrow, 1986; Neill, 1979; Quay and Allen, 1982). "No one can tell how many young people drop out," according to Mann (1985, p. 16); "If you doubt that, ask a group of superintendents to cite individual district dropout rates." This problem exists at the local, state, and national levels (McDill et al., 1985) resulting in widely varying estimates of dropout rates.

Despite these data problems, most sources suggest that dropout rates have declined from around 90% at the turn of the centry, to around 50% by the 1940s, and to approximately 25% by the 1960s, after which there are year-to-year variations but no discernible trend (Kaufman and Lewis, 1968; McDill et al., 1985, 1986; Natriello, McDill, and Pallas, 1985; Quay and Allen, 1982; Wehlage and Rutter, 1986). Employing different definitions, some estimates of dropout rates are as high as 40%, for the 1982 cohort of 18- and 19-year-olds (National Center for Education Statistics, 1985). Rates as much as double the national average are found in some large urban districts and some rural areas (Quay and Allen, 1982). Regional disparities are another piece of the puzzle.

These figures also, as is typical for aggregate statistics, mask important variations based on race/ethnicity and gender. For example, around 44% of Hispanic males are not currently enrolled and are not high school graduates, compared to only 13% of white females. Between these extremes, Hispanic females, black females, black males, and white males have sequentially lower dropout rates, with the last three groups tightly

clustered at round 18-20% (McDill et al., 1985, 1986). Although interpretation of trends requires caution, the current figures represent historic lows for black males and females and for white females, but historic highs for white and Hispanic males (McDill et al., 1985).

The causes of dropping out are multiple and extremely interrelated, but most can be placed in one of four general categories: school experiences, family circumstances, economic factors, and individual behaviors. Kaplan and Luck (1977) and McDill et al., (1985, 1986) use a typology including only the first three of these categories. Fine (1986), Ekstrom et al. (1986), and others employ the first, a combination of the second and third, and some form of the last (e.g., the "individual and collective psychologies" used by Fine).

Academic failure, in the form of poor grades, low test scores, grade retention, and other indicators of performance, when combined with resulting behaviors such as truancy or in-school delinquency, "are clearly the most important precursors to dropping out" (McDill et al., 1986, p. 141; see also Ekstrom et al., 1986; McDill et al., 1985; Natriello et al., 1985). The inability to get along with teachers (especially among males), disinterest in school, course failure, previous suspensions/expulsions, and the lack of post-secondary plans are other school-related factors associated with dropping out (Ekstrom et al., 1986; McDill et al., 1985; Wehlage and Rutter, 1986).

Family circumstances related to dropping out, aside from economic factors, largely involve family formation through marriage and/or pregnancy. Marital factors cause many more females than males to drop out, especially white female dropouts, over one-third of which cited this

reason. Teenage pregnancy, "an important family formation event with well-known negative consequences for schooling," prevents 8 of 10 mothers under age 17 from completing high school (McDill et al., 1986, p. 141). Family circumstances prior to new family formation, such as single-parent homes, are also strongly related to dropout rates and impact on a much larger proportion of students (McDill et al., 1985; Neill, 1979). Low socioeconomic status (SES) and disadvantaged family backgrounds are consistently shown to be strong predictors of dropping out (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Natriello et al., 1985). Related to this, many students, including over one-fourth of all male dropouts, cite the need or desire to work and support a family as their primary reason for dropping out (McDill et al., 1985, 1986).

Several individual attitudes and behaviors associated with dropping out have been mentioned above. Among others deserving mention are low self-esteem and more serious behavioral disorders such as those identified by Quay (1978). Individual attitudes, concerning self, peers, school, or authority, can be proximate causes of dropping out and more distal determinants of a school climate and collective psychology that encourages dropping out.

The interrelated consequences of dropping out, like the causes, are difficult to untangle. The complex relationships between schooling, abilty, and income have generated much scholarly debate and hamper accurate estimation of individual income effects from dropping out. McDill et al., (1986) briefly review the controversy and estimate forgone lifetime earnings as a result of dropping out to be $107,500. Perhaps the most common conclusion concerning individual economic consequences is

that a high school diploma is a necessary credential for future training and education, which in turn has a strong effect on income (e.g., Quay and Allen, 1982). In the aggregate, Levin (1972) estimated that dropouts at ages 25-34 cost the nation over $75 billion, mostly in lost tax revenue, but also for unemployment, welfare, crime, and crime prevention costs (McDill et al., 1985). McDill and co-authors (1986) update this estimate and reach the same conclusion as Levin: "The national cost of keeping students in school can scarcely approach the cost to the nation of dropping out" (p. 155). The cognitive consequences of dropping out are estimated at around one-tenth of a standard deviation on standardized achievement tests, after control for background, past test performance, and other relevant variables (Alexander, Natriello, and Pallas, 1985). High dropout rates can also result in a general, overall lowering of the schools' expectations and standards (Neill, 1979).

A Topology of Potentially Problemmatic Reforms

According to Schneider (1986) "Researchers at Johns Hopkins University's Center for Social Organization of Schools are raising questions that shake the foundation underlying the reform movement" (p. 4), which is a point corroborated by heavy reliance on their work in this paper. At the foundation of the reform movement, one finds higher standards for students. For example, the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth (1984) recommends actions "to make the academic experience more intense and more productive," such as:

> Strengthening the curriculum, establishing new discipline policies, increasing the amount of time students spend in core-subject areas or studying ways to use time more efficienctly, raising high school graduation requirements and raising requirements for student participation in extracurricular activities (p. 27).

The same report applauds "new standards for students" and related "attempts to assure new validity for high school diplomas," through "minimum competency or other types of assessment" (p. 33). The recommendations of the various reports related to higher standards can be categorized into the three broad areas of course content, time devoted to learning, and student achievement. Each of these areas is discussed below in relation to how it is addressed by recent reports on education, how states have responded to reform recommendations, and how the specific reforms can be viewed as threats to dropout rates.

Course content. Concerning standards for course content, the general consensus of reform reports "is that students should be pursuing more demanding sequences of basic courses" (McDill et al., 1986, p. 142). The prototypic National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) lamented that "We have a cafeteria-style curriculum in which the appetizers and desserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses" (p. 18). In response, the commission calls for a core high school curriculum of five "new" basics (more English, mathematics, science, and social studies; some computer science).

State responses to recommendations concerning content were overwhelming. Since 1981, more than 40 states have increased high school course requirements for graduation (Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, 1984; Fiske, 1984); 36 of the states increased requirements after 1983, when the reports were issued (American School Board Journal, 1986). In 1980, only 7 states required 20 or more course units for graduation; by 1985, such requirements were in effect in 12 states; by 1990, if current plans are implemented, 30 states will enforce such requirements. Limiting

attention to academic (i.e., English, mathematics, social studies, and science) course requirements by 1990, the number of states requiring 10 or more units will soar to a projected 36, up from 4 in 1980 and 9 in 1985 (Education Commission of the States [ECS], various Clearinghouse Notes). All but three states are considering or have enacted tougher graduation requirements (U. S. Department of Education, 1984), including all four member states of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory. (See Appendix I.) Although only eight states have adopted requirements meeting those in A Nation at Risk (American School Board Journal, 1986), it is clear that higher standards for course content are the rule, not the exception.

Research (Alexander and Pallas, 1983, 1984) suggests that increased course requirements are likely to have positive impacts on most high achieving students and some students of average ability and achievement, but will have limited and possibly negative effects on students previously exhibiting lower levels of performance--those students already at-risk of dropping out. To the extent that the curriculum is made more uniform and more academic, then student choice is limited, ability is viewed unidimensionally, and stratification occurs. Thus, opportunities for potential dropouts to encounter success are reduced, self-esteem suffers, and the perceptions of others negatively impacts on future performance (McDill et al., 1986; Natriello et al., 1985). In sum, according to McDill et al. (1985):

> A major result of the full implementation of the New Basics could be the clarification of the distribution of ability in these basics, leaving some students only the choice of dealing with constant failure or dropping out of school (pp. 424-25).

Learning time. The second area of higher standards, time devoted to learning, includes several specific recommendations from reform reports. Each of the major reports advocates longer school days and longer school years, two obvious ways of "keeping up with the Japanese." Common recommendations also include more homework, stricter attendance and discipline standards, and better use of existing instructional time. Either longer school days or years have been considered or adopted in 28 states (U. S. Department of Education, 1984).

However, several states adopted only pilot programs (e.g., North Carolina) and many others failed to adopt proposed legislation, such that only eight states have uniformly extended school days or years (American School Board Journal, 1986). Many local districts have enacted demanding homework policies, such as Oklahoma City, which requires two hours per night for high school students (U. S. Department of Education, 1984). Revised student discipline policies are in place in 20 states (Task Force on Education for Economic Growth, 1984). Aside from policies that make better use of existing instructional time, member states of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory have undertaken limited activity in this area (Appendix I).

The negative impact of increased course requirements hinges largely on the lower academic performance of the at-risk population. The negative impact of additional time demands, whether in or out of school, follows mainly from the competing time demands on this population in the form of employment and families. If faced with a choice between job or school, some potential dropouts would become actual dropouts. Beyond this, various researchers (see McDill et al., 1985, 1986) have suggested that

employed students have less time for study, with negative consequences for attendance, grades, and dropout rates that become more severe as work involvement increases. With modest increases in time demands, even limited employment might impede performance. Requiring that more time be devoted to school work may also prevent some extracurricular participation, with resulting negative effects on grades, delinquency, normative attachments to school, and ultimately dropout rates (McDill et al., 1985, 1986).

Student achievement. New or increased standards for student achievement were being established before the recent spate of reform reports, as evidenced by the minimum competency test (MCT) and other assessment and accountability movements of the 1970s (Labaree, 1984). However, the reports spurred continued and new initiatives in this area. Each major report in 1983 called for the replacement of social promotion with strict grade promotion standards, often with explicit linkage to test performance. More frequent testing of student achievement, whether or not linked to promotion or graduation, is a consensual recommendation of the reports. The National Commission on Excellence (1983) and the Task Force on Education for Economic Growth (1983) also advocate "for the use of grades solely to indicate achievement, not as motivational devices reflective of student effort" (Natriello et al., 1985, p. 12). Minimum grade point averages have been adopted as requirements for extracurricular participation.

State MCT programs, already in place in 30 states in 1980, were present in 35 states by 1985 and will be used in 40 states by 1990. Only 12 states required passage for graduation in 1980, whereas 17 states

enforced this requirement in 1985, and 2 additional states will enforce it by 1990. MCT results were used for grade promotion decisions in 7 states in 1980, 8 states in 1985, and will be used in 9 states by 1990. Some type of state assessment program existed in 34 states in 1980, in 41 states in 1985, and will exist in at least 42 states by 1990 (ECS, various Clearinghouse Notes). By mid-1984, 42 states had revised or were revising their student evaluation and testing policies; 19 states, their placement and promotion policies; and 18 states, their extracurricular and athletic policies (U. S. Department of Education, 1984). In this last category, the "no pass, no play" rule in Texas has commanded the most attention.

A possible result of these higher student-achievement standards is the perception among some students who are at risk that such standards are unattainable. Natriello (1984) has demonstrated that this perception leads to disengagement from school, expressed through apathy, absenteeism, and other behaviors predictive of dropping out. Recalling that academic failure and these behaviors are primary precursors of dropping out, it is easily understood how more rigorous achievement standards pose a threat to the at-risk population (McDill et al., 1985, 1986). Furthermore, restriction of extracurricular participation, as was true for increased time demands, "may deprive the school of the only holding power it has for those high risk students" (McDill et al., 1985, p. 426; Otto and Alwin, 1977).

Although not strictly a consequence of the current reform movement, the increased use of MCT programs has generated continuing controversy, largely due to equity concerns for the disadvantaged, minority, and at-risk students who fail the tests in disproportionate numbers (Linn,

Madaus, and Pedulla, 1982; also see several selections in Jaeger and Tittle, 1980). Despite the absence of "systematic evaluative studies" of MCT and at-risk students (McDill et al., 1985, p. 427), a rise in the number of students w drop out because they fail to pass has been predicted (Neill, 197[illegible], p. 32). On the other hand, it has also been predicted that "Most states probably will find mechanisms by which to pass all but a very small minority of their students" (Eckland, 1980, p. 134), thus mitigating
potential adverse impacts on the population at risk.

Summary of Threat Posed by Reforms

The population at risk of dropping out is characterized by low levels of academic performance, behaviors reflective of disengagement from school, minority group membership, low socioeconomic status, high levels of work involvement, a lack of self-esteem, and early family formation. By no means do all potential dropouts fit this description, but some of these characteristics do apply to most dropouts. By imposing stringent standards pertaining to course content and minimum achievement levels and by demanding more time for learning, recent reforms seem to reflect an alarming disregard for the characteristics of this population at risk. The specific reforms discussed above threaten to increase academic failure, frustration, and disengagement, ultimately to be reflected in higher dropout rates.

However, the above description of this threat is necessarily based on reason and indirect evidence, rather than on direct evidence from states and districts that have implemented higher standards and evaluated their impacts. Some research, as reviewed in the many publications by McDill et al., suggests how reforms might impact on dropout rates. Negative impacts

suggested by such research were discussed above; indirect evidence of positive impacts will be addressed below. Without direct evidence, which requires waiting for the time lag between implementation and evaluation, the threat to dropout rates posed by recent reforms is rather speculative. Nonetheless, the reason and indirect evidence available is sufficient for concern. Thus, we now turn our attention to policies that can ameliorate the educational prospects of the population at risk.

Policy Implications: Current and Potential Ameliorative Actions

To address what is being and can be done to improve schools and dropout rates simultaneously, this section first examines policies and policy directions that are already in place in at least some states and districts and then addresses other policies and research of potential benefit.

Existing Policies and Policy Directions

Research and reason suggest that the very policies criticized above will yield positive effects for all students, including those at risk of dropping out. After the possible benefits of higher standards are reviewed, we turn our attention to other policies and policy directions that are part of the current reform movement and that hold potential benefits for the population at risk. Then, past and present policies aimed specifically at dropout prevention are examined.

McDill et al., (1985) succinctly state the first question to be addressed: "Will students respond to higher standards by putting forth greater effort?" (p. 421). Concerning standards in the form of course

content, their answer is based on research by Alexander and coauthors (Alexander and Cook, 1982; Alexander, Cook, and McDill, 1978; Alexander and McDill, 1976; Alexander and Pallas, 1984). Although the first two studies in this series report positive effects from enrollment in academic coursework, even with controls for student background, the later research reveals that placement in the academic track largely reflects prior ability and achievement. The most recent of these studies, as discussed earlier, also shows that completion of the New Basics does not benefit students most likely to drop out. However, since the early studies show benefits for all students from an academic curriculum, since all of the studies show positive effects for most students, and since, in the most recent study, the "effects for poorly performing students are small" (Alexander and Pallas, 1984, p. 411), it seems reasonable to continue implementation of higher standards in the form of more demanding course content, with recognition that this curriculum poses some threat to some students. This recognition involves attention to remediation, the use of alternative schools (both discussed below), and possibly the use of dual diploma policies. These latter policies, which distinguish standard or career diplomas from college preparatory or advanced diplomas that entail higher standards, exist in six states: Missouri, New York, Oklahoma, Rhode Island, Texas, and Virginia (ECS, Clearinghouse Notes).

Concerning higher standards in the form of additional time demands, Natriello et al. (1985), at one point concede that:

> Increasing the time students spend on school tasks does seem to have positive effects on learning, even for students likely to be potential dropouts (p. 13).

An extensive body of research on the quantity of schooling (defined by length of days, length of years, and attendance) has produced somewhat conflicting results. Some have suggested that time in school is, at most, a very limited determinant of learning (e.g., Husen, 1972; Karweit, 1976a, 1976b), while others (Harnischfeger and Wiley, 1976; Wiley and Harnischfeger, 1974) have produced results widely interpreted to mean that "Reading comprehension, verbal achievement, and mathematics achievement benefit significantly from time spent in school" (Bridge, Judd, and Moock, 1979, p. 213). Studies of time-on-task, as opposed to time in school, demonstrate that slower students benefit from additional instructional time and help (Bloom, 1974; McDill et al., 1986). Furthermore, time spent on homework can allow low-ability students to perform as well as "average students who do no homework" (Natriello et al., 1985, p. 13; Keith, 1982; McDill et al., 1986). Thus, despite appropriate caution concerning the research reported above (McDill et al., 1986), the available indirect evidence is sufficient to recommend higher standards in the form of time demands. Two potential problems must be monitored and addressed, however. One problem concerns motivating potential dropouts to spend more time on learning. The other deals with assuring that more time in school is used for learning. Experimentation with school reward structures and flexible time schedules in secondary or alternative schools are two approaches for addressing the motivation issue. Continued development of instructional leadership in principals and other supervisors is possibly a rewarding response to the learning-time problem.

Much research indicates that higher standards for student achievement will also have positive effects for all students. After a review of the literature on the impact of teacher expectations, McDill et al., (1986, 1985)

conclude that higher expectations result in greater student effort (in terms of attention, time on homework, attendance, objective measures of achievement, etc.) for high- and low-ability students. Appropriately, the authors recognize that:

> Although the impact of higher standards on student effort is generally positive, we should not expect dramatic increases in student effort among low-ability students, particularly if higher standards are not accompanied by provisions for additional help for these students (p. 149).

Yet, if increased standards for student achievement are likely to result in even modest increases in student effort and achievement, their implementation should not be stalled. Indeed, if additional assistance is provided for at-risk students, higher standards for achievement are highly recommended.

This brings us to a discussion of other components of the current reform movement (other than content, time, and achievement standards discussed above) that enhance the educational prospects of the population at risk. First among these is the provision of remediation for students in need, once identified. At least 24 of the 40 states with MCT programs, and a similar proportion of the states with assessment programs, link test results and remedial programs. In many cases, special remedial instruction is required for students failing competency tests, and state funding for remedial services is tied to test passage rates (ECS, Clearinghouse Notes). McDill et al. (1986) correctly assert that:

> Certainly, the provision of additional assistance for students who experience learning difficulties appears to be a key factor in the success of any attempt to raise standards (p. 149).

Early identification and remediation, which is obviously preferable to treatment of a population immediately at risk, is a cornerstone of

reforms in many states. For example, North Carolina's Basic Education Program requires and funds remedial services for students at grades 3, 6, and 8 who are identified at "high risk" through testing and teacher judgment (North Carolina State Board of Education, 1986). South Carolina's comprehensive reform package includes "a number of special initiatives to provide extra help to children and youth who may be at risk of not meeting the higher standards" (Peterson and Strasler, 1986, p. 25). These initiatives, including child development programs for at-risk four-year olds, mandatory kindergarten, remedial and compensatory funding greater than the state's Chapter I program, substance-abuse programs, attendance requirements, notification of parents concerning student absenteeism, and much more, have yielded the first direct evidence that higher standards do not negatively impact on any identified group of students. Early evidence from South Carolina indicates that "Black students and all students in South Carolina in a range of grade levels made substantial progress in moving out of the lower quartile" (p. 24). Projections of continued progress, which should be reflected in future dropout rates, highlight the need for early identification of students at risk of academic failure and subsequent remedial services.

The child development component of the South Carolina reform is part of what Peirce (1986) calls "the social supplement to the 1980s' historic wave of state-ordered school reforms" (p. 18A). Peirce describes how governors in Delaware, Kentucky, and other states have, from a human capital, cost/benefit perspective, pushed their states to increase investment in young children and families. Educational policymakers would be wise to join this push for social policies, since such investments in children and families have the potential to weaken

the link between socioeconomic status and dropping out. Further, some specific social policies attack core causes of dropping out. For example, teenage pregnancy prevention is the focus of major new initiatives in Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and Wisconsin (Peirce, 1986). Educational policymakers can address such reasons for dropping out through support for social policies and through school reforms, such as "programs for adolescent mothers and school-work programs" (McDill et al., 1985, p. 419).

Another approach to school reform, the effective schools movement, is unlike most components of the current wave in that it directs attention to the effectiveness of schools for all students, especially those ultimately at risk of dropping out (Edmonds, 1979; Lezotte, 1983; Purkey and Smith, 1983). The intervention strategy of this movement is based on the correlates of schools found to be effective for all students, especially minority students in inner-city schools. While the strategies involved may not be "politically attractive" (Purkey and Smith, 1985, p. 197) and are more frequently used in elementary rather than secondary schools, they should be a part of long-term school improvement and dropout prevention efforts.

Another long-range policy direction with promise for the population at risk is the "value-added" or "improvement" approach to monitoring school effectiveness. Although the accountability movement in education is not new, it has recently resulted in greater attention to measuring the change in student learning as a result of educational interventions (Astin, 1982; MacRae and Lanier, forthcoming; McDill et al., 1986, pp. 169-70). Several states (e.g., California, Florida, South Carolina) and

districts (e.g., Houston; Montgomery County, Maryland) have experimented, sometimes unsuccessfully, with such measures and incentives attached to them. These programs emphasize the needs and progress of individual students, but also reflect student progress in aggregate measures. This parallels Epstein's (forthcoming) suggestion that our goal is "effective students" rather than "effective schools." These directions, as part of long-range improvement efforts, deserve our continued attention.

Contrary to the impression given in some recent literature, the current reform movement has not completely ignored the dropout problem. The Task Force on Education for Economic Growth (1984) points out that:

> Seventeen states report new effects to deal with dropouts and truants. Initiatives include raising the upper age limit for compulsory attendance, new funding for dropout prevention programs, after-school programs, state incentives for districts to develop model programs, alternative schools and new state or district dropout/truant policies (pp. 42-45).

The new funding and new policies mentioned by the task force are obviously vague. It is notable that not one state initiative to deal with the dropout problem is described among the "exemplary state activities" in the Task Force report (1984, pp. 1, 43-45). Model program development, including attention to the compulsory age limit and after-school programs, will be discussed later in relation to needed research. This leaves alternative schools as a primary existing strategy for addressing the dropout problem.

Alternative schools "exist for a variety of students who do not respond well to the academic program and social environment of the traditional school" (McDill et al., 1986, p. 161). Gold and Mann (1984) state that:

> Alternative schools have been created for the gifted as well as the poor student, for the well-behaved as well as the disruptive. ...About all that alternative schools have in common is that their programs are somehow different from the curriculum followed by the large majority of the community's students (p. 4).

These authors estimate that one-third of such programs are designed for students with behavior problems such as "chronic truancy" and "serious delinquency," problems strongly associated with dropping out. These programs employ numerous approaches: "disciplinarian, 'back to basics,' detention, behavior modification, and others" (1984, p. 4; Deal and Nolan, 1978). McDill et al. (1986) recommend both an organizational change approach--as employed in the School Action Effectiveness Study and utilized in Project PATHE, Charleston, South Carolina (Gottfredson, 1983)--and, when dealing with "more serious behavior disorders," the behavior modification approaches described as effective by Quay (1978). Hamilton (1986) and Lotto (1982), after reviewing numerous dropout prevention programs, recommend alternatives that separate potential dropouts from other students, have strong vocational and work components, and offer intensive instruction (i.e., small classes, individualization, counseling, etc.). For students obviously at risk, as evidenced by their behavior, performance, and "clearly expressed attitudes" (Hamilton, 1986, p. 420), appropriate alternative programs are highly recommended.

Other Recommendations from the Research Literature

The first source of additional recommendations for policy initiatives is the literature on the alterable characteristics of schools that have a disproportionate share of discipline, truancy, and dropout problems. A generally unalterable characteristic of these schools is

their location, typically in urban and poor areas with concentrated minority populations, just as the literature on the individual causes of dropping out would predict. Important alterable characteristics related to the incidence of behavior problems include the size of the school, the quality of administration, individualization of the curriculum, and several elements of the school climate (McDill et al., 1986). A wide range of fiscal commitments--for example, financing smaller schools--and policy directions, such as effective school programs that emphasize administration and climate, can address these characteristics.

Concerning the next source of policy guidance, Hamilton (1986) says:

> Research results are never powerful enough to dictate policies and practices, nor can research take into account all of the influences that can and should bear on policy and practice (p. 412).

Mann (1985) adds that "better practice ought not wait on more research" (p. 17). Awareness of these truths requires that the recommendations discussed earlier be given priority over the research agenda outlined below. Nonetheless, at least two general areas of research seem essential to dropout prevention.

The first is increased attention to program development, experimentation, and evaluation. Future policies should be guided by what can be learned through experimentation with various alternative school programs, flexible time scheduling (e.g., 5-year programs, evening programs), different approaches to remediation (e.g., in-school, after-school, summer), changes in compulsory attendance age limits, school incentive programs aimed at reducing dropout rates (see Wynne, 1984), and other dropout prevention efforts. Mann (1985) states that

"Action creates understanding" (p. 17). Through action, on a limited basis and with careful design and evaluation, we can continue to develop a better understanding of what works and what doesn't, in what cases.

Secondly, more and better data on the student characteristics, school processes, and consequences related to dropping out are desperately needed (Natriello et al., 1986). Such information will make possible valuable research, such as cross-state, cross-district, and over-time analyses of the impacts of increased standards on dropout rates. This data is also needed for more immediate policy purposes, at the school and district levels for use in improvement programs (Cooley, 1983; forthcoming), at the district and state levels as a component of incentive systems (Wynne, 1984; MacRae and Lanier, forthcoming), and at the national level in the development of policy indicators (MacRae, 1985). The data collection process should incorporate the "full enrollment model" recommended by McDill et al. (1986), which includes dropouts whenever possible in the calculation of "aggregate performance measures," thus "making them reflective of both excellence and equity concerns" (p. 167).

Conclusion

Given the attention that McDill and his coauthors (1986) have focused on whether higher standards will be detrimental to at-risk students, it seems appropriate to quote one of their recent conclusions at length:

> Finally, we must continue to present challenging standards to secondary school students, particularly at-risk students, if we wish them to attach sufficient value to schooling to stay until

> graduation. Although we have questioned the practical effects of some of the specific types of standards recommended by the recent reform commissions, higher standards should increase the value of schooling for all students, if such standards should increase the value of their reach and are not simply used as sorting and screening devices. There is growing evidence that students of all ability levels respond positively to more challenging standards when they have a chance to achieve them. It would be a terrible waste if the admirable goals put forth by the school reform commissions were defeated by the inappropriate and insufficient means suggested for achieving them (p. 169).

Thus, without steering away from higher standards and the push for excellence, we need to be conscious of the potential negative effects of some policies on some students and to do all that is possible to lessen or even prevent these impacts. This implies a wider conception of excellence than the norm-referenced, technical, human capital conception that is now widely held. A broader conception of excellence and concern for equity require that we pursue a variety of policy recommendations (summarized in Appendix II) that offer immediate and long-term benefits for the population at risk of dropping out.

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APPENDICES

Appendix I

Summary of Excellence Reforms Perceived as Threats to Dropout Rates in Member States of the Appalachia Educational Laboratory

1. High School Graduation Course Requirements:

	State	Year	Total	Academic	Enacted	Effective
a.	Kentucky	1980	18	9		
		1985	20	11	1982	1987
b.	Tennessee	1980	18	7.5		
		1985	20	9.5	1983	1987
c.	Virginia	1980	18	9		
	(std. diploma)	1985	20	12	1983	1988
	(adv. diploma)	1985	22	16	1983	1985
d.	West Virginia	1980	18	9		
		1985	21	11	1985	1989

2. Time Devoted to Learning:

	Policy Reform	Kentucky	Tennessee	Virginia	West Virginia
a.	Longer day	No	No	No	No
b.	Longer year	No	Yes	No	No
c.	Instructional Time	Yes	Yes	Yes	Proposed
d.	Discipline	Yes	Yes	No	No

3. Student Achievement Standards:

a. Kentucky's minimum competency testing program, covering grades K-12, is used for remediation. The State Superintendent reported to the 1986 legislature concerning uses in graduation and promotion decisions. The Kentucky state assessment program employs a custom developed test of reading and math in grades K-12. Since 1985, language arts, spelling, and library skills are also assessed.

b. Minimum competency testing in Tennessee, in grades 3, 6, and 8, is used by local units for remediation and promotion decisions. Passage of a MCT, first given in grade 9, is required for high school graduation. State-developed tests are used in the state assessment program, which tests various grade-level combinations in five subject areas.

c. Virginia's MCT program, with standards set by the state and local units, tests grades K-6 and, for graduation, grades 10-12. One part of the state assessment program, objective-referenced tests of math and reading for grades 1-6, is being phased out. Testing remains in grades 4, 8, and 11.

d. West Virginia has no MCT program, but does test grades 3, 6, 9, and 11 in a variety of subjects in its state assessment program.

Sources: Education Commission of the States, Clearinghouse Notes; U. S. Department of Education (1984); American School Board Journal (1986).

Appendix II

Summary of Policy Recommendations

- Higher standards for course content, time for learning, and student achievement should not be abandoned. Positive effects from these standards can be expected for most students, including many in the population at risk. Yet, concern for this population requires the provision of additional assistance and attention to a variety of policies so that higher standards can be met.

- A variety of policy initiatives and directions already in place in at least some states, such as dual diploma programs, strong remedial components in comprehensive reform packages, social policies for children and families, and effective school programs, should reduce dropout rates in the long run, if given sustained commitments.

- Appropriate alternative educational programs should be available for students immediately at risk of dropping out.

- Future research should focus on policy development, experimentation, and evaluation using various types of remediation, alternative schools, and dropout prevention that are suggested by research and practice. Better data on dropping out could benefit both research and practice, perhaps most importantly by allowing careful monitoring of the impacts of higher standards.